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Axiological pessimism, procreation and collective responsibility

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Abstract

A form of pessimism can support the claim that we have a collective duty to prevent the creation of additional human beings. More specifically, I argue that axiological pessimism, which suggests that human existence is overall bad (for humans) because of a form of evil it causes, implies that we should end human procreation, provided that we do not thereby generate further such evil. In turn, this conclusion can support anti-natalism, the normative view that we should refrain from procreating.

KEYWORDS

anti-natalism, badness of existence, collective responsibility, philosophical pessimism, value asymmetry, value of humanity

> Life is a hospital where every patient is obsessed by the desire of changing beds.
> —Charles Baudelaire, Anywhere Out of the World

Pointless, cruel and unbearable suffering is a characterising feature of human existence. Such suffering is clearly bad, at least for the people who have experienced or are currently experiencing it. Pessimists claim that, at least presently, the badness (or disvalue) of human existence – partly attributable to such immense suffering – exceeds in several respects its goodness (or value).[1] What

[1] Recent 'analytic' iterations of pessimism can be found in Benatar (2006, 2015, 2017). See also Beiser (2016), Dienstag (2006) and Van der Lugt (2021) for historical works on pessimism. I use 'disvalue' and 'badness' as stylistic variants. Also, I use 'disvaluable' to refer to the property of having negative value, and 'disvalue' to refer to what has negative value, as well as to a negative value itself.

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is more, human existence and perhaps sentient life more generally do not seem to be trending towards improvement in this regrettable aspect: not only do humans continue to suffer, but they also continue to inflict various evils on other human and non-human beings in a quantity and quality that far exceeds the creation of positive value. This prompts a question. Where ending the practice of human procreation is unlikely to lead to its own additional negative consequences, should we then stop increasing the volume of this 'miserable lot'?

In this paper, I will outline one version of pessimism and discuss what normative conclusions can be drawn from it, in particular an affirmative answer to the previous question. Various pessimists (e.g. David Benatar) have already argued that, in most cases, it is ethically impermissible to have children.[2] However, Pallies (2024) has recently argued that even if pessimism were true, it would almost always be permissible to procreate. Ultimately, I reject a possible reply to Pallies based on Benatar's view because of its reliance on an implausible asymmetry in value between the creation of good and bad. In Section 3, however, I elaborate a version of pessimism – *axiological pessimism* – according to which the occurrence of some kinds of disvalue, which I call *supreme evils*, are sufficient to characterise the state of affairs in which they occur as overall bad, regardless of the number of events of positive value also occurring within this state of affairs.[3] After having clarified some aspects of axiological pessimism (including the claim that some evils aggregate), I dedicate Section 4 to showing that this version of pessimism can successfully reply to Pallies' argument on the permissibility of procreation. In addition, I articulate a direct argument for anti-natalism that concludes with positing that we have the shared responsibility of halting human procreation. This responsibility extends beyond merely abstaining from procreating to developing those morally permissible means that are likely to be conducive to ending human procreation.[4] My arguments are then defended in Section 5.

1 | PESSIMISM ABOUT HUMAN EXISTENCE

According to Frederick Beiser, German philosophers who participated in the 'pessimism controversy' at the end of the nineteenth century converged on assuming that 'pessimism is the thesis that life is not worth living, that nothingness is better than being, or that it is worse to be than not be' (Beiser, 2016, p. 8). Other uses of 'pessimism' to classify a philosophical position include the ideas that a pessimist, as such, lacks any systematic belief about the future (Dienstag, 2006, p. 40) or that the future will contain only further suffering (Bergström, 1978). In this paper, I will focus on a form of pessimism according to which the overall disvalue of human existence exceeds its value, albeit contingently so. The overall disvalue of human existence may be grounded in the fact that it is bad for us to have existed and exist, either individually or as a species. The pessimist may

[2] See Benatar (2006) and (2015, pp. 18–39). The argument has been amply debated – see Bradley (2010, 2013), Harman (2009), Weinberg (2016) and Yoshizawa (2021).

[3] This suggestion, although not entirely new, has not been fully developed in more precise terms in the contemporary analytic literature on philosophical pessimism. Recently, the focus has been on the normative aspect of allegedly qualitatively different kinds of competing claims: for example, whether we should save someone from death rather than preventing a multitude from suffering a mild ailment (see Voorhoeve [2014] for a recent contribution to the debate and Horton [2021] for a survey). The focus of this paper is on qualitative discontinuities between kinds of *values*.

[4] Again, although the ideas behind these arguments have circulated in various forms, this is the first attempt (to my knowledge, at least) to clearly state the kinds of duties we have towards refraining from procreation as a form of *collective* duty. Previous similar arguments (e.g. Benatar's misanthropic argument) are not developed using the current literature on collective responsibility.

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also argue that, owing to its poor track record, the future of our species is very likely to beget more disvalue. Pessimists are not committed to the claim that all sentient existence is necessarily bad for those entities having well-being (i.e. for those entities for whom things can be good or bad). In fact, some forms of pessimism are compatible with the suggestion that it is possible for future human (or other sentient) beings to lead an overall 'net valuable' life. Perhaps human beings will evolve into a species of sentient beings capable of leading such an overall 'net valuable' existence, either individually or as a species.

Although the following discussion does not presuppose any theory of well- and ill-being, I will assume that, within any such theory that is plausible, pointless suffering (e.g. unpleasant feelings that are neither finally or instrumentally valuable to the sufferer), humiliation, the imposition of horrific and demeaning tasks, lack of liberty and so on are all bad for those individuals undergoing them.[5] Inflicting these experiences without good reason would constitute a kind of harm, increasing the disvalue of the targeted life. On any plausible theory of well- and ill-being, hedonic states (pleasure and suffering) would play, at least partly, a role in determining what is good or bad *for* individuals – and, on some views, what is good or bad *simpliciter*. I will not assume that nihilism about the meaning of life, the claim that life is meaningless, is entailed by pessimism. For example, axiological pessimism, the form of pessimism further developed in the next section, can be compatible with the claim that life has meaning, or at least that *some* lives have meaning: perhaps a meaningful life is one devoted to the reduction of widespread pointless suffering. On some objective list theories of ill-being, the lack of cosmic or ultimate meaning of our lives (i.e. the claim that our lives are meaningless 'from the point of view of eternity or the universe') decreases their value.[6] Still, human existence's lack of ultimate meaning may be just one of the factors (albeit an important one) that determines the overall value of each human life.

I will assume that, in addition to things or events being good or bad *for* entities with well-being, things or events can be good or bad 'period', or 'simply good or bad'.[7] For instance, inflicting pointless suffering is a case of harming, and such harming is bad for the harmed person. In addition, the state of affairs including the occurrence of such a harm is bad simpliciter – not merely bad for the person who suffers. Some philosophers also claim that the occurrence of certain events may be good or bad independently of whether they are good or bad for some individuals. For instance, two worlds equally devoid of sentience may be differently valuable because one is more beautiful than the other, even though such instances of beauty do not make anybody's life better. Some forms of pessimism can be defined to reflect a belief in absolute goodness or badness: these varieties may rely on claims that (i) the disvalue (badness) of human existence *for* humans exceeds its value (goodness), but further contend that (ii) the disvalue (badness) of human existence exceeds its value (goodness). In what follows, I will assume that (i) sufficiently grounds (ii): those pessimists who believe in absolute values would say that, given that human existence is overall bad for human beings, it is bad simpliciter. As already stated, the main purpose of this paper is not to directly defend these views, but rather to explore their consequences for the anti-natalist debate. Now, we will move on to consider a possible implication of pessimism: if human existence is bad overall, should we stop procreating?

[5] See Griffin (1986) and Kagan (2014).

[6] See Metz (2022) for discussion on this point.

[7] See Kraut (2011) for a defence of the view that there is no absolute good or bad, and that a thing can be only (i) good or bad for someone, or (ii) good or bad of a kind.

2 | FROM PESSIMISM TO ANTI-NATALISM

One seemingly natural conclusion to be drawn from pessimism is that, because human existence is bad, procreation (the act of bringing about new human beings) is impermissible – or, at least, that it is permissible only to the extent that it would prevent greater disvalue. The pessimist may argue that human existence is (presently) overall bad for each human; producing conditions for suffering and ill-being is morally bad; creating human beings produces conditions for suffering and ill-being; therefore, creating human beings would be impermissible.

However, the connection between pessimism and anti-natalism can and has been variously questioned.[8] For instance, Pallies (2024) has recently claimed that, even assuming a pessimistic perspective, there are cases in which we may have reasons defeating the above reason to refrain from procreation. More specifically, Pallies discusses a version of pessimism according to which it would be better for us if we did not exist. This version of pessimism can be regarded as a consequence of the form of pessimism defined above: if our existence is overall bad for us, it reasonably follows that it would be better for us if our existence had never occurred; given that human existence is overall bad for us, it would have been better for us if we did not exist. Now, Pallies claims that we may have additional reasons that defeat reasons for not procreating (i.e. reasons that defeat reasons for avoiding the badness of each human existence caused by our procreative acts). This is at least compelling in those cases in which we are justified in believing that the specific created person will approve of being created – which, judging by what almost everyone alive would say, is likely to be nearly everyone we would create. If we have such a justified belief, then we have a defeater of the reason against each procreation (i.e. coming into existence always implies a harm to the created). Pallies' argument proceeds by showing that there is at least an analogous case in which it seems intuitively plausible that there can be such defeaters, suggesting that similar relevant conditions apply to the case of procreation (Pallies, 2024, pp. 760–767). For instance, consider a situation in which you are contemplating waking up your wife to show her a funny position in which your newborn is sleeping despite the fact that it would very likely be better to let her rest without interruption. Even though waking her up does not comparatively maximise her well-being or may even, in some sense, harm her, you have reason to believe that she would also approve of having been woken up. The case of procreation, according to Pallies, is relevantly similar: it seems permissible to harm someone to the extent that we have reason to believe that the affected person(s) would (reasonably) approve of it.

On behalf of the anti-natalist, Benatar may invoke the distinction between the notions of a life worth *starting* and a life worth *continuing*. Benatar may then argue that it is wrong to assume that Pallies' case in which it is intuitively permissible to harm someone is relevantly similar to the case of procreation. In particular, the anti-natalist could suggest that although we may be justified in believing that an existing person (e.g. the mother in the previous case) may reasonably consent to a harm inflicted upon them – to the extent that her life would at least still be worth *continuing* – the case of procreation is different because it involves considering whether a life is worth *starting*.[9] Benatar could then suggest that we should deploy a more stringent standard when evaluating

[8] Rivka Weinberg sometimes seems to suggest that life is bad (2016, p. 120); when not writing in jest; however, she appears to adopt a more agnostic view on whether overall life is objectively bad (2016, p. 125). In any case, she defends the claim that, although life certainly involves at least severe risks, it is permissible to procreate in some cases.

[9] Someone will reasonably consent to being made worse off within certain limits: namely, in those cases in which their lives, because of our actions against them, would still be at least worth continuing. Applied to the case in question, we might argue that if the cost of one's wife observing a funny sleeping position were to cause her complete paralysis and

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whether a life is worth starting than when we evaluate whether a life is worth continuing. And this more stringent standard, according to Benatar, is rarely (if ever) satisfied.[10]

That this standard is higher than (or at least different from) that of a life worth continuing is partly motivated by an asymmetry in value between bringing about a good (e.g. a pleasure) and causing something bad (e.g. suffering). In such cases, Benatar claims, there is an asymmetry between the creation of value and disvalue: the absence of (any) pain is good (even if nobody enjoys this good), whereas the absence of pleasure is not bad – except when such an absence constitutes a deprivation (Benatar, 2006, p. 30). Intuitively, the claim is that while avoiding bringing about unnecessary pain is good irrespectively, the absence of good is not bad – if such an absence does not consist in a deprivation to an existing individual. A consequence of this asymmetry is that it is never preferable to choose to bring someone into existence, since the absence of pain is good (and every human being inevitably suffers) *and* nobody would be better off in being deprived of the absence of pleasure. Benatar can thus partly agree with Pallies' assessment of his case study, which suggests that, in some cases, it may be permissible to not comparatively maximise someone's existing well-being or harm someone. However, Benatar *could* argue that there is a decisive disanalogy between this case and those involving procreation. In particular, the case involving the future consent of an existing person would involve an existing person consenting to be made worse off (in some respect), whereas in the case of bringing a person into existence, there is no such deprivation of value. Rather, coming into existence is at most neutral in terms of its preferability or 'being better' over non-existence. In the case of lives entirely lacking any suffering (or any other disvalue), coming into existence would be neutral: the asymmetry implies that lives would either never be worth starting (when there is even some minimal suffering) or at most indifferent.

I do not find this possible anti-natalist reply convincing. This is partly because I find the asymmetry in value, as outlined by Benatar, neither sufficiently justified nor intuitively appealing, at least if we consider some of its most extreme consequences. For instance, such an asymmetry – understood as both a necessary feature of value and as providing normative reasons against procreating – would imply that no matter how great the benefits to a person, such benefits could never provide a moral reason for inflicting even the slightest existence-inducing harm on an individual. Consider the case of Antony. In his life, he will suffer only a very mild headache on his 18th birthday; his parents or the rest of humanity will not suffer or be negatively affected by his birth or existence; he will live at least until the end of the universe a life of bliss, that is, a life with no further pain other than the mild headache and comprising only a sequence of mostly pleasurable experiences. However, according to Benatar, Antony's life would not be worth starting. If we use the aforementioned asymmetry for determining our moral reasons, there will not be any moral reason based on future benefits to create Antony. I find these conclusions, especially the normative one, implausible. A life of bliss would seem to provide at least a defeasible moral reason to create Antony, also because (by hypothesis) it would cost his parents nothing. To the extent that Benatar's asymmetry implies this conclusion, I find the asymmetry implausible. This may suggest that I do not share in holding some version of the so-called 'intuition of neutrality'

excruciating suffering until the end of her life, we should assume that she would not approve of being woken up. Pallies (2024) recognises such possibility.

[10] Benatar is not always clear on this point.

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within population axiology, which is sometimes stated as the claim that, all other things being equal, we never have moral reasons to create people, irrespective of their future quality of life.[11]

Nothing in what I am suggesting entails that there cannot be any value asymmetries between causing pleasure and pain, or between the absence of pleasure and pain – especially in determining our obligations to future people.[12] However, whichever threshold or asymmetry we may want to deploy to demarcate cases of lives worth starting from those *not* so worthy, it does not seem compelling to utilise that strict threshold or asymmetry proposed by Benatar, given its implausible consequences. It is worth noting that I do not mean to claim that the possibility of creating a blissful life is a moral obligation: rather, I am merely suggesting that a blissful life does seem to be worth starting, and that there is at least a defeasible moral reason for creating such a life at no cost.

The reason just provided for rejecting the value asymmetry on which the anti-natalist's reply relies is not the only one; however, because other arguments against it have been extensively discussed elsewhere, I will not repeat them here.[13] Rather, I will focus on what I take to be the most promising strategy for linking pessimism to anti-natalism. Focus again on Pallies' strategy to establish that it may not be forbidden to procreate, even in those cases in which we would make someone comparatively worse off, provided that the procreated would likely approve of it. This approval would be the defeater of the reason against creating this particular individual. To reply to this strategy, we may suggest that (i) there is a sufficiently strong defeater of this defeater (i.e. a reason strong enough to measure favourably against the likely future approval of having been created), or (ii) some forms of disvalue are such that no future approval may provide reasons strong enough to defeat the reasons to produce or create the condition for generating such disvalue. In my view, the most promising strategy available to the pessimist willing to argue for anti-natalism is to claim that there is a qualitative distinction between kinds of disvalues such that enough occurrences of *some* forms of badness cannot be outweighed by *any* good (or by any good of some specific kind). If future approval is regarded as a good, then this form of pessimism would imply that some forms of badness cannot be outweighed by any amount of future approval. The anti-natalist could then argue that participating in future instantiations or continuation of such qualitatively egregious disvalues would be a sufficiently strong defeater of the approval of future individuals to be brought into existence. Before exploring such an argument in more detail, however, I will discuss the plausibility of positing such forms of disvalue.

3 | DISVALUE AND EVILS

Some pessimists (e.g. Arthur Schopenhauer) have argued that certain forms of disvalue (e.g. pains, suffering or evils) (i) cannot be fully compensated [*kompensiert*], (ii) cannot be wiped off [*getilgt*], (iii) will never be balanced [*ausgeglichen*] by certain forms of value (e.g. pleasure), (iv) are more

[11] I find intuitions suggesting that 'it isn't better for a person to have a good life than not to exist' to be similarly implausible (Nebel, 2019, p. 127). The intuition of neutrality is sometimes stated referring to a 'neutral range': there is a range of levels of well-being such that creating people who have lives falling within this range does not make the world better or worse, even if nobody is negatively affected. See Broome (2004, p. 145) and Rabinowicz (2009) for discussion. Caviola et al. (2022, p. 1) reports that 'participants [in their studies] did not consider the creation of new people as morally neutral. Instead, they viewed it as good to create new happy people and as bad to create new unhappy people'.

[12] See Hurka (2010) on various forms of asymmetry in value not limited to pleasure and pain but also virtues and vices, etc.

[13] See the convincing arguments proposed in Harman (2009) and Bradley (2010).

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unworthy than the worthiness of a thousand pleasures[14] or (v) will never be done away with by happiness and joy.[15] In short, there are not enough symphonies, merry dances and joyous laughs to make up for the world's sorrows. This point can be taken to mean that, as a matter of contingency, there happens to be more disvalue than value in the world. However, the previous assertions about value discontinuities can instead be taken to allude to a point about the structure of values. In particular, they can be taken to allude to a kind of discontinuity between good and bad things, such that there cannot be any number of instances of a kind of good to compensate for the occurrence of enough of some kinds of disvalue.[16] That there are discontinuities among kinds of good things has been suggested as an interpretation of John Stuart Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Just as there are plausible discontinuities in valuable things – the pleasure of scratching one's head, say, is of a kind that *any* amount is yet inferior to the joy of experiencing one's child succeeding in their life – there may also be qualitative discontinuities among certain forms of disvalue. For instance, it may be plausible to argue that the singular occurrence (or enough occurrences) of severe torture in one's life is worse than any number of very mild discomforts to one's little finger. At very least, it does not strike me as irrational to prefer to live for any number of years with a mild discomfort in one's finger (e.g. stiffness in one's pinkie when one wakes up) rather than be tortured to an extreme degree even once. Although both forms of suffering are certainly bad, it does not seem unreasonable to prefer even an infinite number of instances of stiffness in one's finger to one instance of severe torture.

Now, just as there may be such good–good and bad–bad discontinuities, there may also be good–bad discontinuities in values such that, at least for some kinds of good and bad events, an instantiation of a bad event or enough instantiations of a kind of disvalue are always worse than any number of occurrences of good events (or of good events of a certain kind). Intuitively, there is no number of gelato desserts that would make up for being raped once. Such discontinuities between kinds of values and disvalues may differ depending on whether the occurrence of relevant events is determined by causal interactions among different individuals. For instance, imagine that the occurrence of numerous small pleasures (e.g. savouring ice cream) within a group of people causally determined even a moderate pain to an innocent. Some may argue that there is no number of such small pleasures that would make their occurrence better than the avoidance of this moderate pain. There are various ways to make these considerations more precise. For instance, following Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2015) and Dorsey (2009), we may define certain structural relations among kinds of value as follows:

> Weak K-Worseness: enough of events of kind E are K-weakly worse than events of kind B iff for some number *n* of instances of E, n-instantiations of E would make a state of affairs s bad no matter the number of co-occurrent instances of B in s.
>
> Strong K-Worseness: enough of events of kind E are K-strongly worse than events of kind B iff any instance of E would make a state of affairs s bad no matter the number of co-occurrent instances of B in s.

[14] One might here recall Petrarch's famous saying, '*Mille piacer' non vagliono un tormento*'.

[15] For discussion of Schopenhauer's own version of pessimism, see Janaway (2006) and Simmons (2021).

[16] See Crisp (2022, pp. 375–376) and Griffin (1986, pp. 85–89) for the notion of 'discontinuities' in value, as well as Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2015), Dorsey (2009), Norcross (1997) and Skorupski (1999) for further discussion.

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Given this framework, we can define certain relations among kinds of good and bad that violate the Archimedean property of value: for any two different kinds of valuable A and B, there is a number *n* such that *n* instances of A are at least as good or bad as instances of B (Arrhenius & Rabinowicz, 2015, p. 232). The pessimist may then define different forms of disvalue violating this principle. For instance, the pessimist may define an *absolute* evil as an event of kind A that would make a state of affairs *s* overall bad irrespective of the number of instances of any kinds of positive values (e.g. pleasures, achievements) Ps occurring in *s*. In other words, no matter what the quantity and quality of Ps, a state of affairs in which Ps co-occur with an instance of A is always overall bad.[17]

For the purposes of this essay, the *axiological* pessimist will deploy a more qualified form of evil:

> A *supreme* evil is an event of kind S that would make a state of affairs *s* overall bad regardless how many instances of kinds of positive value $k_1,\ldots,k_n$ occur in s, where $k_1,\ldots,k_n$ are the kinds of positive instances of value currently available to humanity.

The idea is that occurrences of supreme evil are such that no number of instances of kinds of positive value currently available to humanity would be sufficient to compensate (in value) for them, where *s* is the whole of human existence. What makes an event a supreme evil may be its derivation from a sufficient number of properly connected occurrences of certain kinds or forms of disvalue of a certain magnitude, intensity and duration.[18] For instance, the axiological pessimist may argue that a number of occurrences of various kinds of intense, pointless suffering are jointly sufficient to be an instantiation of a supreme evil: years of millions of lives spent in continuous humiliation, torture, mutilation, abuse and starvation before being concluded by violent and painful death should count as an occurrence of a supreme evil. Would anybody be so callous as to plausibly claim that the unbearable suffering of millions of people could be 'made up for' (in terms of value) by an infinite quantity of delicious sips of lemonade, pleasant symphonies or witty conversations? The existence of such supreme evils would provide a basis for certain normative principles that propose the impermissibility of causing certain supreme evils, even if their occurrence would also be causally necessary for other goods. Such normative principles would not suggest that it would be impermissible to generate certain goods once certain supreme evils have already been generated – and where the former causally depends on the latter. The principle is rather that it would be impermissible to generate certain supreme evils on the basis that some other goods causally require such evils.

Have instances of supreme evil ever occurred? The axiological pessimist may argue that the history of humanity has seen a staggering number of instances of supreme evil. Even within exclusively the past century or so, we can find likely candidates in a series of horrific events: the Holocaust, the Holodomor, the Bucha massacre, the atrocities committed in Mali

[17] One recent expression of this idea is quoted in Bergström (1978): Ingemar Hedenius argues that the evil we know to have already happened is such that it cannot be outweighed by any good. A calculation of the overall value of human existence need not proceed by weighing the goods against the evil that occurred, as what has already happened is so evil that it simply cannot be counterbalanced by symphonies, welfare arrangements, etc.

[18] I am not interested in providing an analysis of the concept of 'evil' as used in everyday discourse or in other philosophical debates (e.g. the problem of evil in philosophy of religion). The term is used here stipulatively to refer to events of a high degree of magnitude, duration or intensity of disvalue. See Russell (2020) for a recent philosophical discussion of evil. The conception of evil as involving a great amount of harm of various sorts was explored by, among others, Card (2002, 2010). See also Little (2022) for the notion of evil applied to the understanding of human history.

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by members of the Wagner group, the Atarib market massacre, the Hass refugee camp bombing, the Katyn massacre, the atrocities committed on Finnish children in the Finnish Lapland by Soviet partisans and so on. This is but a very limited sample of such atrocities. Benatar aptly summarises the appalling ways in which large numbers of people treat other human beings thus:

> Humans kill other humans by hacking, knifing, hanging, bludgeoning, decapitating, shooting, starving, freezing, suffocating, drowning, crushing, gassing, poisoning, and bombing them. (Benatar, 2015, p. 86)

Benatar reports that when Iraqis, in the 1990s, released a 19-year-old Kuwaiti prisoner, they did so after having cut his genitalia, ears and nose. He was released to his parents with his eyes in his hands, then shot in the stomach and the head (Benatar, 2015, p. 87). At the 51st session of the Human Rights Council (23 September 2022), it was reported that the Commission 'has documented cases in which children have been raped, tortured, and unlawfully confined' by Russian invading forces in Ukraine.[19] The acute, devastating and pointless suffering that human beings have inflicted and endured is, if possible, amplified even further by the perpetrators' attempts to manipulate the truth and thereby hide their horrible deeds. The extreme and pointless violence, along with the additional injustice of their denials, would appear to merit the characterisation of supreme evil. No matter how good an ideological cause may appear to be to its supporters, the evil of torture, starving children and maiming innocent human beings cannot be outweighed by the alleged goodness of a purported future utopian society or the restoration of national pride.

It is plausible to argue that even if the precise boundaries of what constitutes a supreme evil may be vague in some contexts (e.g. how many minutes of torture, or how many severed limbs, would count as an instance of a supreme evil?), the above events are evils of such a proportion, magnitude and extension that if *anything* would count as supreme evil, then these atrocities perpetuated and endured by human beings certainly would count. The axiological pessimist may also argue that a supreme evil need not only comprise cases of intense and extended suffering but also include gross violation of desert values – for instance, that certain dictators or other people who committed supreme evils are still glorified (Hurka, 2010, p. 211). In short, there could be a plurality of kinds of supreme evils.

There is one more very important point to make concerning the axiological structure of supreme evils: the occurrence of two supreme evils is worse than the occurrence of only one. That the Holocaust and the Holodomor happened is worse than a hypothetical reality in which only the Holocaust did. In general, although human existence is overall bad, it could be even worse: supreme evils aggregate. In short, further instances of supreme evil may make the existence of humanity even worse. The normative implications of this view entail that we may have increasingly strong reasons to halt further occurrences of evil despite the fact that the past has already ensured the overall irremediable badness of human existence. In fact, the pessimist would argue that while we cannot make things right, we should at least not make them worse. In the next section, I will explore the theoretical consequences of this pessimistic axiology for arguments in favour of anti-natalism.

[19] https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/09/update-chair-independent-international-commission-inquiry-ukraine-51st-session

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4 | FROM EVIL TO ANTI-NATALISM: OUR COLLECTIVE DUTY TO STOP PROCREATION

Once we recognise the existence of supreme evils, both endured and caused by human beings and other species, we may argue that such evils do generate or constitute strong (moral) reasons against procreation. Firstly, consider again Pallies' challenge to the anti-natalist. He claims that future approval of being brought into existence is a defeater of the reasons that we may have for not starting a new life. The axiological pessimist may argue that this claim is based on an axiology that does not properly recognise the badness of supreme evils. For example, we may draw on the concept of a supreme evil to argue that, in many cases, the risk of exposing our children to a supreme evil, given the magnitude of its badness, can be a sufficient defeater of their likely future consent to being created. After all, the argument may continue, there is no likely goodness in their future lives (if they survive at all) that may outweigh the occurrence of a supreme evil. Supreme evils are not, furthermore, remote possibilities tied to landscapes of struggle: they occur also in what are regarded thriving and 'happy' communities.[20] There is another point against Pallies' argument, which may function as a second defeater: the evil that our children may directly generate or to which they may causally contribute. The intuitive idea behind this point can be made as follows: the fact that a Stalin or a Hitler (or their followers) would approve of their existence does not seem to be a defeater of the reasons for not bringing them into existence, given their direct causal contribution to supreme evils.

Now, we may reply that we have good reasons to believe that we will not generate a new murderous dictator or other extremists – or, at least, that it is very unlikely that we will. We may suggest that, in those cases in which the risks of suffering or causing supreme evils are reasonably low, procreation may at least make the world slightly better (although perhaps not overall good). Even granting this point, however, each newborn would still contribute at least to the continuation and proliferation of the human species, a species that causes and endures – and will likely continue to perpetrate – supreme evils.[21] The fact that members of such a species are likely to approve of their existence seems to support a weaker reason than the fact that the continuation of the species is accompanied by the almost certain cost of creating new supreme evils. The good that the continuation of the species may contribute or the approval of its members to be created are outweighed by the evil that the species is committing and, critically, is almost certain to *continue* committing (at least in the near future). Preventing contributions to the occurrence of supreme evils – either directly or through the collective contribution to the continuation of the human species – would thus provide stronger reasons against procreation than the reasons in support of it. We may also argue that contributing to the (almost certain) future occurrence of supreme evils (again, either directly or through collective contribution to the continuation of the human species) is a direct reason against bringing someone into existence – a reason so strong that it would not be defeated by an individual's approval of having been brought into existence. Hence, we have strong reasons against procreation, at least in those cases in which the end of human procreation would not lead to additional evils.

In the remainder of this section, I will discuss two anti-natalist arguments based on the harm that contributing to the continuation of the human species causes. The first argument shows how the fact that human beings causally produce, contribute to and endure supreme evils can be used

[20] However, see Weinberg (2016) for further discussion on this point.

[21] In some cases, each newborn will probably contribute to the continuation of a bellicose and deeply corrupt society that shows no signs of future improvement.

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in a direct argument underlining our collective and shared moral responsibility to at least refrain from procreating, as well as possible additional actions designed to reduce the likelihood of further human procreation. The anti-natalist pessimist may argue that we, as members of humanity, have a collective moral duty to ensure that instances of supreme evil will not be repeated and thereby make the world even worse. Arguably, one of the most effective ways to ensure this is to cease procreating and thus gradually end human existence. For each existing individual, this imposes a minimum duty of refraining from procreating, which comprises part of a broader collective duty to avoid extending the future of humanity (which will almost certainly contain more supreme evils). In addition, the anti-natalist may argue that we have a collective duty to *stop* the procreation of human beings – and not simply to *refrain from* procreating. More precisely, the anti-natalist may argue as follows:

Argument 1

1. We have a collective responsibility to stop the procreation of members of a species that suffers and causes supreme evils.
2. Human procreation brings about members of a species that suffer and cause supreme evils.
3. We have a collective responsibility to stop the procreation of human beings.

Notice that the conclusion of this argument is stronger than a mere injunction to refrain from procreating. In fact, the conclusion can be used as a premise to argue that we each must partake in a shared duty to do what we can to ensure that no additional humans are generated (rather than simply stopping our own procreative acts). For instance, we may argue that, in light of our collective responsibility to stop human procreation, each of us has at least a defeasible duty to contribute to such a responsibility. Refraining from procreating is certainly one way to stop the procreation of human beings, but presumably not the only one. The conclusion of the first argument can be used as a premise for this anti-natalist argument:

Argument 2

1. We have a collective responsibility to stop the procreation of human beings.
2. Refraining from procreating is, in most cases, one of the most effective ways of stopping the procreation of human beings.
3. In most cases, we should refrain from procreating.

In the rest of this section, I will clarify some of the notions deployed in the above arguments and support their premisses. Firstly, I will articulate a response to the following question: what *is* the collective responsibility or duty to stop human procreation? Sometimes the notion of *collective* responsibility is used to refer to the responsibility of a single, unified moral agent (e.g. a corporation), whereas *shared* responsibility is associated with individual agents who contribute to an outcome 'as members of a group either directly through their own actions or indirectly through their membership in the group' (Smiley, 2022) (e.g. members of a group). In this paper, I will not always make this distinction, although I will focus on the duties of individuals of the group 'humanity' – which I doubt can be usefully regarded as a single, unified moral agent such as (in some cases) a corporation. On one 'individualistic' account of having collective duties, having a joint obligation is simply a way of holding an obligation, that is, jointly. This way of holding an obligation is a (collective) mode for two or more agents to have an obligation. Such obligations

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engender individual obligations: for instance, that each individual who jointly possesses the obligation does their part in making an effort to fulfil it. In cases in which more than *n* agents jointly have the obligation but only *n* individuals can successfully perform the action, the joint obligation yet applies to all of the individuals. An agent may infer their individual contribution on the basis of the collectively available options, where a collectively available option is an option for two or moral agents to do something that cannot be done solely by the agent themselves. Other accounts of joint or collective duties involve the claim that groups themselves can be the proper object of forms of normativity that may be irreducible to those of individual members of the group. For instance, some collectivists have argued that groups ('joint plural subjects') can be the exclusive proper objects of certain forms of moral blame. Such plural subjects would be required to make sense of collective moral responsibility (Gilbert, 2000; Velleman, 1997).

In the case of human procreation, the suggestion here is that we each have at least the shared responsibility of refraining from procreation as part of our collective responsibility to stop the creation of further human beings, which seems one of the best options for ensuring the prevention of further evils. In the case of halting human procreation, we have the collective duty to perform an action that requires the contribution of numerous individuals to be successful: again, ending human procreation to stop further supreme evils from coming into existence. The recognition that the occurrence of supreme evil generates a collective duty reflects the fact that a great sum of such evil is committed collectively – mass killings, genocide and other structural forms of oppression are some compelling examples – and, crucially, that only collective action can bring about the desired state of affairs (i.e. the end of such evils).

As in the case of our duty to stop or ameliorate anthropogenic climate change, it may seem implausible also in the anti-natalist case to suggest that there is an organised or proper group – say, humanity – having any collective duty. However, even if that were the case, it *has* been plausibly argued that random collections of individuals may have collective duties to perform certain actions, including actions that may require coordination to be successful (Held, 1970; Igneski, 2018, 2020). For instance, it seems plausible that strangers in proximity to a car accident have the collective duty to perform an action that clearly requires the contribution of each individual stranger: to rescue a victim from the accident wreckage in a timely manner, which includes the task of coordinating their efforts to optimise strategy and likelihood of success. If people recognise their duty to stop procreating with the purpose of eliminating supreme evil, they may attempt to communicate their intentions and reasons so as to generate, eventually, collectively desirable patterns of action that would more easily bring about the intended outcome – that is, they may form a 'shared plan' (Shapiro, 2014). The anti-natalist pessimist may argue that, akin to other global problems requiring the coordination of many individuals to succeed, stopping human procreation may require the formation of organisations and structured groups to explain the ethical rationale, advocate for the cause, educate on the subject of our species' tremendous evils, eradicate the 'delusion' of the goodness of human existence and so on.

To further support the first premise of the first argument, we may specify under what conditions it would be reasonable to hold a loose collection of individuals to a collective responsibility – specifications which will then lead to the further position that our existing situation satisfies these conditions in the context of anti-natalism. For example, consider a series of conditions, individuated by Anne Schwenkenbecher, that propose how to determine when it is reasonable to ascribe a joint duty to a loose collection of individuals (Schwenkenbecher, 2014, p. 68):

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(i) *Joint ability*: acting together is possible and relatively easy, individuals should be capable of discharging their contributory action.
(ii) *Epistemic simplicity*: it is clear what needs to be done, it is clear what each individual should do and when the goal has been accomplished.
(iii) *Limited demandingness*: no disproportionate sacrifice is required.

In short, a collective responsibility to act is possible when the agents involved are capable of doing the required action, the action is relatively simple to understand and the action is not disproportionately demanding. With respect to the first two conditions, every rational person seems to have the capacity to understand at least what refraining from procreation entails, to do so, and (possibly) to take additional steps to further the cause of halting human procreation. Arguably, it is the *opposite* of this demand (e.g. procreating) that requires some additional capacity or opportunity; non-procreative sex is relatively easy to perform (it is arguably as easy as procreative sex). Similarly, the epistemic condition seems satisfied: in most contexts, it is easy to understand what steps are necessary to avoid procreation, and, as a motivational precondition, it is also relatively easy to be educated on the evils that human beings engender.

It may not be easy to *accept* the reasons why it would be better not to procreate, but the message itself is not difficult to understand. Human beings generate and endure a staggering amount of evil, including supreme evil, and, given this, we should pursue at least the likely most effective course of action to end such evil. The only condition that may prove difficult to meet in many cases is the last one (i.e. iii): refraining from procreation would put a significant strain on some people's well-being, in the sense that it would render unattainable a so-called 'natural good' widely regarded as an important dimension of a meaningful life. However, any charge of demandingness should be evaluated with respect to its proportionality – in this case, in terms of the benefits that would accrue in relation to the sacrifice required of some people.[22] While it is certainly true that having children may be rewarding and contribute to the meaningfulness of someone's life, living a childless life may be equally rewarding and meaningful. On the other hand, the additional supreme evils that the continuation of the human species will most certainly produce cannot be counterbalanced by the benefits that having children would bring to some parents. If we accept the claim that humanity engenders supreme evils and most likely will continue to do so, then ending procreation does not seem disproportionately demanding compared with the benefits that would be produced by forgoing children.

5 | OBJECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The claim with which we ended the last section may need some further refinement to be entirely plausible. In fact, we may note that abruptly ending procreation would probably have tremendously negative effects on the ageing population – and this new variable would impose new considerations that significantly affect our calculation of 'demandingness' (e.g. ceasing procreation may thereby become too demanding of a duty). In such a situation, there would be fewer people able to take care of the childless population, fewer labourers producing goods in the workforce, fewer leaders capable of running a functional society and so on. Still, there are at least two replies to this objection. Firstly, we may insist that additional almost certain supreme evils are, in comparison, still worse than failing to provide benefits to the ageing population. Even if the

[22] See Sobel (2020) for an enlightening discussion of this notion, with special focus on consequentialism.

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ageing population would suffer in enduring the gradual depopulation of our planet, entailing loss of comfort and meaning in their lives, stopping procreation would still likely produce a better outcome than the alternative.[23] This reply perhaps presupposes without sufficient argument that the evils that would be avoided would be more substantial or worse or fewer in number than the evils that would be generated by stopping procreation. However, a second reply is also possible. In particular, we may argue that the collective duty to cease procreating comes with an auxiliary duty: that is, with the duty of ensuring that the gradual depopulation of our planet takes place in manner that it is as painless as possible – or, at least, as devoid of further (supreme) evils as possible – for those complying with their duty to not procreate. How this may be achieved is a difficult but not irresolvable matter. Perhaps future technological advancements will make it possible to gradually depopulate our planet in a seamless and painless way. The duty to ensure the end of human procreation may thus turn out to be conditional upon our capacity to develop those means that would make this achievement at the very least not worse (with respect to new supreme evils) than a procreative future. After all, as previously remarked, the duty to end human procreation would be primarily motivated by an intention to eradicate very likely future evils – a matter of benevolence.[24]

In conclusion, I will reiterate simply that if we believe that there are instances of supreme evil, and that such instances provide strong normative reasons (and both claims, on reflection, are persuasive), then it is plausible to hold that we have a duty to stop such evils. Given that human beings are likely to continue to generate such evils, this duty may involve bringing about the end of humanity as it seems one of the most effective ways of ensuring the result. Refraining from procreation, compatible with the duty of minimising the occurrence of supreme evils, is arguably the most compelling means of achieving this (imperfect) duty of beneficence.[25,26]

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[23] See Scheffler (2013) for a vivid description of the ill effects of a diminishing humanity on the surviving population.

[24] For reasons of space, I have not addressed a further possible objection to the second argument: namely, that the prescribed (imperfect) duty to refrain from procreating would be 'empty' because each individual would think that they cannot make a difference to the cause of ending humanity if only they refrain from procreating. Because their procreative act would not make a difference, they may not have a duty to refrain from procreating. This is not a problem specific to this case, and it has been discussed in other contexts: see, for instance, Nefsky (2019). Among the various solutions proposed, the one in Nefsky (2017, 2023) seems particularly promising. The fact that refraining from procreating would at least causally contribute to the causation of evil would still generate a reason for action (even if the action, by hypothesis, does not make a difference to the overall outcome).

[25] Following the Kantian use of 'imperfect duty', we have such duties *sometimes*, not absolutely. From the above discussion, it is clear that this is the kind of duty that we have with respect to refraining from procreation.

[26] As a matter of record, I do not believe that we should end humanity. One of the purposes of this paper, however, is to outline what strikes me as one of the best reasons for the anti-natalist position. Should my two children leave me sufficient time to write, I will criticise this position in the future. Many thanks to Roger Crisp, James Fanciullo, Daniel Pallies and the anonymous referees of this journal for their comments and suggestions.

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